



November 26, 2007

NEW USE FOR OLD PLANT GETS ATTENTION IN WASHINGTON

By The Associated Press

WASHINGTON - A plant once called "Gold of Pleasure" that flourished thousands of years ago in Europe could be a promising new crop - and source of energy - for farmers in the arid High Plains.

A new project announced last week in Montana and a provision in the farm bill moving through the U.S. Senate could jump-start production of the crop, now called camelina.

Recently thought of as a weed, politicians are now touting it as a hearty source of energy that will survive dry weather in states like Montana and North Dakota, and as a way to reduce the country's dependence on foreign oil.

The oilseed was once prolific in Europe, and even was used by the ancient Romans to make lamp oil. But other crops eventually replaced it. Now it's enjoying a revival as a potential source of biodiesel.

It is also high in omega-3 fatty acids, which could increase its prospects for marketing in the health-food arena and makes it a valuable feedstock for poultry and livestock.

"It's got a lot of upsides, and I don't see any downsides," said Montana Sen. Jon Tester, who added \$1 million to the Senate farm bill to help farmers alleviate some of the risks of growing the crop.

The farm bill also includes a provision authored by Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., to extend renewable energy tax credits to camelina, along with other language that would include the crop in other farm programs.

But not everyone is on board yet. Camelina is new enough that many people don't even know what it is.

It's been mocked by some politicians in Washington who don't like the \$286 billion farm bill, saying it's too expensive and full of extra money to help lawmakers win re-election.

New Hampshire Sen. Judd Gregg, one of the leading Republican critics of the legislation, mentioned camelina in a recent Senate floor speech excoriating the bill.

"It adds, I think, four new major subsidy programs for new crops, including asparagus and camelina, which I don't even know what that is," Gregg said.

Tester says it's time for critics like Gregg to understand the prospects for camelina.

"It's an important thing to know," he said. "This is a step forward to making this country energy-independent."

North Dakota Sen. Kent Conrad, a Democratic author of the farm bill, said his state is closely watching Montana's progress with camelina. He says the farm bill incentives could spur rapid increases in production of the crop around the region.

"It's very well adapted to our part of the world," he said.

Agriculture Commissioner Roger Johnson said North Dakota doesn't grow much camelina right now, but the state's success in growing canola would bode well for the crop.

In Montana, Tester, Baucus and Democratic Gov. Brian Schweitzer announced Tuesday that two out-of-state companies will launch a joint venture to use camelina to produce up to 100 million gallons of biodiesel a year by 2010.

The companies behind Sustainable Oils said the project will use a new strain of camelina, created by Seattle-based partner Targeted Growth, that will produce even more oil than conventional camelina.

Representatives for the other partner in the deal, Green Earth Fuel of Houston, said the company has a new processing plant in Texas capable of making 90 million gallons of biodiesel a year. That company plans to look at building a plant in or around Montana in the next couple of years.

The companies said they will offer contracts to farmers that will be competitive with other crops, starting with 30 to 50 farmers next year and expanding to several hundred farmers in the following years. They expect most of the camelina will be grown in Montana, while some will be grown in eastern Washington, Wyoming and the Dakotas.

Growing camelina has its risks, however.

Because it's so new, it's hard to find approved chemicals to fight weeds that can overtake the plant, said Leonard Stone, a Geraldine farmer who has been growing the crop since 2004, rotating camelina with his wheat and barley crops. Stone lost a field of camelina to weeds this year.

"Because it's early in the process, we're in some ways limited to try and raise it organically," he said.

Stone said Tester's proposal to help farmers obtain crop insurance for camelina would help make the crop attractive to more farmers. While the number of camelina acres in Montana has grown rapidly in recent years, there still are relatively few farmers growing it.

"To get people to seriously consider raising a crop for biofuels, you'd like to have a little protection where you at least get your expenses back," Stone said.

For now, the Senate farm bill is stalled in a procedural dispute between Democrats and Republicans. Tester said he hopes the legislation moves soon and that members on both sides eventually recognize the benefits of camelina.

"We haven't raised enough acres yet to say this is a slam dunk, but it's a potentially good crop for Montana and the country," Tester said. "Every gallon we make from camelina is one less gallon we have to take from the Middle East."